ON THE DRY SIDE 198 WHAT IS THE NEW RIGHT? John Hyde

If the 'new right' is a threat to anything decent it should be opposed, but attacked honestly for what it is, not portrayed as the bunyip at the bottom of the garden.

No living Australian can remember a time when political ideas have changed as sharply as during the past six years.

In much of the world, liberal, free-market, small government ideas are rapidly gaining acceptance and authority, rather as they did one hundred and forty years ago, around the time when Britain repealed the tariffs on imported grain - the infamous corn laws.

Philosophies developed from presumptions of the worth of individual liberty and the necessity of responsibility for one's own actions are again persuasive. I and others who are being called 'new right' generally start from these presumptions. From this starting point it follows that voluntary associations and free markets are better than a command society. Concentrated power is abhorrent.

Power is the ability to push other people around. Although abuse of it---leading to death, destruction and confiscation of property---is most often the handiwork of non-democratic governments, we also do not trust trade union officials nor corporate managers with much power.

It follows further that the family is a more important social entity than the state, and the state's tendency to take over familiar responsibilities is to be deplored.

After decades of collectivism these ideas are radical, Mr Dawkins, but you are wrong to refer to them or us as treasonous. Senator Joe McArthy, Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin each confused disagreement with treason with very unfortunate consequences. So, in a way, did Richard Nixon.

I wish those who insult us could work out what to call us. In the short space of six years the ideas and those who hold them have been called neo-conservative, economic rationalist, dry, and now 'new right'. The last is an attempt to associate us with the authoritarian ideas we oppose. There is no greater slander than that we are careless of the aspirations of ordinary people. The insult comes particularly ill from self-serving politicians and union officials.

We have been subjected to orchestrated attacks of unusual vehemence and inaccuracy by Labor Party politicians. They say we are shadowy treasonous troglodytes turning back the hands of time. Mr Punch MP even likened us to Communists believing in confrontation between capital and labour. Dear me, Mr Punch, the reason we want to do away with centralised industrial relations is that it causes confrontation between workers and management.

We have no power. The best evidence so far of our influence is the dry policies which Labor governments have adopted - floating the currency, allowing in foreign banks, part-restoration of university fees, reducing the budget deficit, reducing protection for motor cars, reviewing work practices, dropping controls on mineral exports, the promise of a flatter tax, a promise to reduce tax and welfare cheating, and several attempts to reduce agricultural regulation. The Victorian Labor Government is privatising 5000-government owned houses.

Labor's rhetoric has adopted our agenda. Except in trade union circles the accord is being sold as a policy for keeping wages down and hence employment up. Productivity is now all important.

Our wishes are to reduce union power, and certain unfair business privileges and protections, balance the government budgets, reduce public expenditure and taxes, and stop middle-calss rip-offs in general, restore competitiveness to the economy and protect the family are mainstream aspirations. In short, a more unlikely bunch of traitors than the so-called 'new right' would be hard to imagine.

However, our accusers are right in one thing. The ferment of political, social and economic ideas is not an accident. Overseas, and in Australia, thousands of people keep the debate alive, as the so called 'new left' set their agenda in the 1960s.

Not many of the 'new right' people design Utopias; most are concerned with the world they experience. They try to change it at the margin with the only weapon they have, argument. They address specific problems such as foreign debt and family breakdown. Many---I was one---started on a more authoritarian road to an ideal society but left it when we saw ordinary people lose their liberty and dignity and economies collapse.

It is not very helpful to talk of a 'new right' philosophy because clearly more than one philosophical tradition is at work. It is beyond me to say how many. The differences surface in attitudes to, say, drugs. Attitudes here range from libertarian: if someone wants to poison himself that is his business; to rational pragmatism: let us try to avoid much associated suffering, crime and corruption, by registering and supplying addicts; to traditional conservatism with moral majority overtones: drugs are destroying individuals and disrupting families so drugs must be stamped out.

The differences are rarely relevant to policies which must work on the margin of existing practices. For instance, although many traditional conservatives wish to discriminate in favour of the conventional family and most libertarians, dries and European liberals do not want the state to discriminate between life-styles, the immediate question is what is to be done about taxation and other discrimination against the family which chooses to have one partner stay at home to nurture children.

If, as now seems likely, there is to be a change of government, Mr. Howard will have appealed to traditional conservatives and economic rationalists. If the traditional conservatives are now convinced by the debate that privileges like tariffs and closed union shops are an affront to liberty and the generation of wealth he should have no great problem.

Labor's electoral strategy seems to be to adopt as many 'new right' policies as polititcally necessary and by damned lies and labels to try to separate the rest of them, and Howard, from middle Australia.